

# Sri Lanka: unions end month-long nationwide university strike

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Sri Lanka's Inter University Trade Union Joint Committee (IUTUJC) ended a month-long national strike of non-academic employees late last week after agreeing to a small salary increase and the promise of a future monthly compensation allowance.

The IUTUJC includes unions affiliated with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), a key member of United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government, the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which resigned from the government twelve days before the strike began, the United National Party, and several "independent" unions.

Nearly 10,000 employees from 13 universities and 26 related institutions were on strike since June 28 for a pay rise outstanding since a 2004 agreement to end salary anomalies between administrative grades and non-academic staff. Striking employees also demanded payment of a monthly compensation allowance (MCA) that has been withheld from junior non-academic staff who joined the service after 1997.

According to a 2004 report by the government-appointed Sri Lanka Institute of Development Administration (SLIDA), non-academic employees' pay should be increased from between 2,880 to 3,350 rupees (\$US29 to \$33) to end salary anomalies. But the IUTUJC leadership limited its demands to a 950-1,950 rupee interim allowance and settled for allowances ranging from 500 to 2,000 rupees, far short of the original claims.

The national strike, which involved thousands of Tamil and Muslim workers in the North and East, cut across chauvinist divisions fostered by Sri Lanka's ruling elite and the union leadership. Three major demonstrations were held during the strike: on July 4 and 20 thousands of workers demonstrated at their respective universities and on July 26, 500 workers

from several universities protested inside the University Grant Commission (the universities administrative body—UGC) premises in central Colombo.

The IUTUJC decision to end the strike was unanimous and came after marathon discussions with Deputy Minister of Higher Education Dinesh Gunawardane and University Grant Commission officials on July 27 and 28. The IUTUJC leadership agreed to cut their demand for an interim allowance almost by half—from 8.7 million rupees to 4.63 million per month—signed a collective agreement at midnight July 28 and sent their members back to work the next day.

Anxious to end the strike, union officials claimed that the deal was a "great achievement" but did not put the agreement to a vote or give employees the opportunity to speak at work-place meetings on July 29. The striking workers, who kept isolated from other industrial campaigns by Sri Lankan health employees and Cooperative Wholesale Establishment workers, had little option but to accept the new agreement and return to work.

While full details of the deal will not be available until this week, no specific timetable has been provided for the ending of salary anomalies. The UGC has said it will award the monthly compensation allowance on November 30, "after collecting information" and receiving cabinet and treasury approval. But this promise is dubious, given the government's record of broken promises and the political uncertainty surrounding President Chandrika Kumaratunga's unstable ruling coalition regime.

A group of angry Colombo University employees told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "We launched the strike to rectify salary anomalies but the final result is no different from our previous struggles in 2003 and

2004. After a long strike we got an interim allowance, instead of rectifying anomalies, and an incredible future promise from the authorities. Every successive government has deceived us and there is no difference this time round.”

While university staff have been fighting since 1997 to correct salary disparities, university authorities have deliberately pitted academic and administrative grades against non-academic employees. This has involved increasing academic and administrative grade salaries. The union bureaucracy, rather than challenging this deliberate divide-and-rule tactic, has refused to fight for united action of all university employees.

In 2003, mounting anger among non-academic employees over the issue forced union officials to organise industrial action lasting 22 days to demand a pay rise to end salary anomalies. In an attempt to defuse the strike the then United National Front (UNF) government assigned the Sri Lanka Institute of Development Administration (SLIDA) to investigate. Union officials agreed not to press for arrears of a 1997 pay increase in order not create “financial difficulties” for the government.

But the SLIDA recommendations were not adopted. In September 2004, non-academic workers walked off the job again to demand a 2,500 rupee interim allowance until the full proposals were implemented. After three weeks of industrial action, union officials agreed to a 1,000 rupee allowance and ended the strike.

Rising prices for food and other essential items over the past 10 months provoked the latest strike but union officials again opposed any joint action by academic and non-academic employees. The workers were also isolated from university students, despite the fact that they all face increasing attacks on public education.

The government, acting on the orders of the World Bank and the IMF, has encouraged local and foreign investors to start private schools and universities while introducing fee-paying courses in state-funded universities. Under the government’s proposed education reforms, non-academic staff workloads will be increased and the permanent workforce cut through contract recruitment. Various university services, such as cleaning, gardening and security are also being handed over to private companies.

The JVP, which occasionally postures as socialist, played a pernicious role in the strike. Twelve days

before the strike began, the party quit the government in protest over President Kumaratunga’s decision to authorise a deal with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for the joint administration of tsunami aid. The JVP denounced the Post Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS) arrangement as a betrayal of the Sri Lankan nation.

The JVP came to office for the first time in April 2004 as part of the ruling coalition promising to lift the living standards of workers, farmers and the poor. But it quickly lost ground as the government and its ministers broke their pledges. The whipping up of communal sentiment against the P-TOMS agreement is a convenient diversion from its own record in government.

The JVP is also using this chauvinist campaign to appeal for support from sections of the ruling elite that are deeply hostile to any concession to the LTTE. In doing so, the party is deliberately distancing itself from the growing demands of workers and others for pay rises and improved conditions.

In line with this, JVP officials told workers that the strike action should be contained in order to develop opposition to the P-TOMS agreement. One non-academic worker told the WWS: “Some JVP union leaders tried to discourage us, saying that it was not the occasion to go on a strike because the country faced a serious crisis. They also attempted to block us marching and picketing and said we had to fight against P-TOMS instead.”

Santha Bandara, co-secretary of the IUTUJC and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) union leader, later claimed to the *World Socialist Web Site* that the month-long strike had won “an important gain while minimising the financial loss for both the government and us.” His comments reflect the JVP’s orientation: it is seeking to demonstrate to the powers-that-be that a JVP government could be counted on to be economically responsible and suppress the demands of working people for improved pay and conditions.



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